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11

109 Ways TO BOOST YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNITY

Kellie Gillespie-Wright looks at how improving our mental wellbeing can help us to cope with the ebb and flow of life

Pass the tissues! It's the usual refrain at this time of year, as the cold, flu and whatever else germs seem to be gearing up for the winter. To try to head off the worst of them, we instinctively focus on bolstering our physical immunity. So we stock up on vitamins, get our flu jabs, and bundle up in warm clothing to protect ourselves from the cold. It's a good idea to take care, and these actions are essential for staying physically healthy during the colder months,

but there's another type of wellness that all too often goes overlooked: our psychological immunity. Keeping this in tip-top condition is key to how well we cope with life's ups and downs.

Because the reality is that we are constantly encountering challenges, setbacks and disappointments that affect our mood and can even jeopardise our wellbeing. These experiences can leave us feeling deflated, or worse. But more often than not, we find ways





Expert advice



Ian Stockbridge is the founder and lead therapist at Hope Therapy & Counselling Services, a well-established practice supporting mental health and wellbeing across the UK.



Dr Claire Tobin is a clinical psychologist who works with people who have experienced trauma, or adverse early life experiences using Schema Therapy, Mentalisation-based Therapy and other approaches. lighthousepsychology.co.uk

to restore our mood and our ego – so how do we manage to bounce back and keep our self-esteem intact?

Luckily, our minds are more resilient than we realise, and our brains are equipped with built-in processes that help us cope with stress, maintain emotional stability, and pick ourselves up after a shock, injury, or disappointment. And that's the psychological immune system (PIS).

'The psychological immune system protects and maintains mental wellbeing in the face of emotional and psychological challenges just as the physical immune system defends the body against disease,' says Ian Stockbridge, founder and lead therapist at Hope Therapy & Counselling Services.

When this system is functioning well it enables us to reframe negative experiences, find meaning in adversity, and maintain a positive outlook even when faced with challenges. 'It helps us adapt to negative events by triggering a variety of psychological responses,' says Stockbridge, 'and these responses, in turn, help us reframe or attach meaning to our situation so that we can facilitate psychological change and, ultimately, recovery.' On the other hand, a weak psychological immune system can make coping with life's challenges difficult, leading to overwhelming feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression if not managed properly. This can result in a reliance on maladaptive coping behaviours, such as smoking, alcohol abuse, eating disorders, or drug use.

A physiological link

Some physiological problems also have psychological roots, and a growing body of evidence suggests that many illnesses that affect the body, from acne to arthritis, headaches to heart disease, and cold sores to cancer, are influenced, for better or worse, by our emotions. 'The body and the nervous system are inherently intertwined with



our psychological immune system,' says clinical psychologist Dr Claire Tobin, 'and physical and psychosocial healing will often occur in tandem.' So it makes a lot of sense to strengthen our psychological immune system, regardless of the time of year.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert first coined the term 'Psychological Immune System' in the noughties. This system beavers away in the background, subconsciously developing 'psychological antibodies' that help to increase our capacity for resilience and adaptation, training and rewiring our brain to learn from adversity, and protecting us against the

psychological damage caused by failure, trauma and stress.

'Life will inevitably throw us curveballs,' says Dr Tobin. 'The psychological immune system is the resilience to weather these storms. It is our ability to stay psychologically buoyant amid grief, traumatic experiences, stress, and transitions. It is the mind's ability to maintain a sense of hope and meaning in the midst of hardship, distress, and loss.'

So, what's actually going on with our psychological immune system, and how can we keep it running smoothly? Think of it as having three main strands working

together to help manage our mental and emotional wellbeing.

First up, we have 'Approach Beliefs'. This is all about **how we see the world** – do we view it as a **place full of opportunity** or a chaotic mess? To strengthen this part, it helps to **focus on positive thinking**, set **realistic goals**, and find meaning in what we do. It's all about personal growth, **seeing challenges not as threats but as chances to learn and grow**.

Then, there's the 'Monitoring-Creating-Executing Beliefs' part. This one helps us **stay prepared** for whatever life throws at us. It's about being open to **change**, welcoming new perspectives, cultivating **creativity**, building

confidence in your abilities, and setting **clear, achievable goals**.

Finally, we have 'Self-Regulating Beliefs'. This part keeps us balanced by managing our

PROBLEM SOLVING

Being able to identify, analyse, and solve problems effectively can reduce the impact of stress and make you feel more in control and competent. This can help you to navigate challenges more smoothly and lessen the emotional strain of stress.

FLEXIBILITY

Being able to switch up your thinking and behaviour when things change is incredibly important because it helps you to avoid getting stuck in negative thought patterns and encourages you to find fresh solutions to problems.

▶ NEXT STEPS

Watch Daniel Gilbert, *The surprising science of happiness* (Ted Talks)

Listen OneMinding Podcast – 'Do we have a Psychological Immune System?'

Read *The Psychological Immune System: A New Look at Protection and Survival* by Herman Kagan

GROWTH

A growth mindset, or the belief that you can improve your abilities through effort and learning, is another great way to fortify your mental defences, making you more likely to bounce back from setbacks and keep pushing forward.

ACCEPTANCE

'Acceptance of difficult emotions can ultimately strengthen the psychological immune system by helping us to process them rather than being in a constant battle with them,' says Stockbridge. 'This acceptance can then build emotional resilience.'

PRESENT

Focusing on the here and now helps stop negative thoughts that can lead to anxiety and depression. 'Mindfulness helps us notice when our thoughts are escalating and enables us to adopt strategies to better ground ourselves,' says Stockbridge. 'Cultivating a mindful practice can help us to accept our thoughts and feelings without judgment.'

PURPOSE

Having a clear purpose can also come in useful here. 'When we can find a clearly defined sense of purpose, we are often more able to see the challenges we face as opportunities rather than as obstacles that can not be overcome,' says Stockbridge.

MANAGE

Managing your emotions in a healthy, balanced way is crucial because it helps keep emotions from becoming overwhelming or destructive. Research shows people who are good at regulating their emotions tend to experience less anxiety and are better at handling stress. Deep breathing, cognitive reappraisal, and mindfulness can really help sharpen this skill.

GRATITUDE

Practising gratitude is powerful. By regularly acknowledging and appreciating the good things in life, you can boost your psychological resilience, reduce stress, and increase your overall sense of wellbeing.

POSITIVE

Optimistic people are more likely to push through challenges, recover quickly from setbacks, and maintain a positive outlook on life. Optimism has also been linked to lower stress levels and greater overall wellbeing.

SLEEP

A consistent sleep pattern of seven to nine hours each night can restore cognitive function and reset the PIS, making it easier to handle challenges. 'Chronic sleep loss can weaken the psychological immune system, making individuals more susceptible to anxiety, mood fluctuations, and other psychological and emotional issues,' says Stockbridge.

emotions and impulses. You can strengthen it by learning techniques like deep breathing, mindfulness, or guided meditations to keep your emotions in check.

Building impulse control also helps – try counting to 10, take a moment to consider the consequences of your actions and explore other options.

Together these work away in the background to help us make sense of tough situations, find the silver lining,

and move forward. But there are also plenty of ways we can support them!

Remember, your psychological immune system, much like your physical one, is vital to your overall health and wellbeing, so as you prepare for winter, don't just focus on your physical health; take the time to nurture your mental resilience as well because by boosting your psychological immunity, you ensure that you not only survive but thrive, no matter what the season brings.

